

T.Y Tour to Italy

By David Carmody

Mercy Mounthawk's school tour to Italy was an unequivocal success. Impressively, the tour took in the renowned Northern Italian cities of Milan, Florence, Venice and Verona, as well as the charming Lake Garda town of Sirmone.

After departing from Tralee at 1:30 am, the seventy three weary but eager teenagers arrived in Dublin Airport at 5am with seven teachers in tow. They arrived in Milan Linate Airport for 11:00 am. The students' first glimpses of the fashion capital and home of La Scala was a snow filled one. Unfortunately, it was Italy's coldest winter in twenty years but this did not deter the students' anticipation. If anything, it added an air of extra excitement.

Landmarks the students viewed included the majestic Milan Duomo which is the third largest church in Christendom and San Siro Stadium, home of AC and Inter Milan. Understandably, the stadium was a firm favourite with many of the boys who got the chance to see the stadium where the likes of David Beckham and Ronaldo once graced.

Florence, the birthplace of the Renaissance, was the next stop. The students went on a walking tour of the city and marvelled at the many beautiful buildings, such as Filippo Brunelleschi's domed masterpiece, the cathedral of Santa Maria del Fiore.

Other notable attractions visited included the world famous Academia Galley which boasts Renaissance works such as the marble statue of David by Michelangelo, as well as the Ponte Vecchio (Old Bridge), one of the city's most famed bridges which provides a breathtaking view of the city and the river Arno.

After this, the group journeyed on to Sirmone; a picturesque town full of cypress trees and prettily painted yellow houses. Famous visitors to the town have included James Joyce and Ezra Pound. Situated on the shores of Lake Garda, the town holds many other sights such as the ancient ruined villa of noted Roman poet Catullus and a picturesque 13th century Scaliger castle. Here the students took a leisurely boat ride which provided an excellent view of Lake Garda's many wonders. Since the town has a long history of thermal springs, the sulphur of the famous waters was to be smelt during the boat ride. Equally pleasant was the cable car ride up Mt Baldo, the highest point in Italy which is an imposing 1070m height. This offered splendidly panoramic views of the town of Malcesine and its environs.

Unsurprisingly, Venice, the City of Water, was perhaps the highlight for

many of the students. It was the second day of the annual carnival of Venice. Venice's carnival is an unique and centuries old tradition in which the people of Venice don traditional Venetian masks and spectacular costumes for two weeks of merry making. This makes for a truly unique and novel spectacle. Even the cold wintry weather could not obscure the beauty of Venice's architecture nor its unrivaled atmosphere. Prominent visitor attractions in the city include the Dodges palace, the aptly named bridge of Sighs and St Mark's Basillica.

Besides seeing some of Italy's marvels, the young people experienced the country's culture by ethuasitically sampling Italian cuisine, most notably the specialities such as the delicious ice cream in Italian called gelato and the thin crispy pizza. In the evenings, the teenagers were kept entertained by activities such as bowling. On the final evening, there was a quiz which tested the information newly acquired by the students on their trip.

Verona, home of the ill fated lovers Romeo and Juliet, was the final stop on the tour. The visit to the picturesque city of course included a visit to Juliet's balcony and the remarkable Roman amphitheatre, the Arena. The romantics of the group were enchanted by the graffiti fervently scrawled on the courtyards walls by earnest couples. After an afternoon spent exploring the heart of the city and doing some last minute shopping, the exhausted transition years headed for Milan's Malpensa Airport laden with their purchases and much enlightened by their trip abroad.

Undoubtedly the tour was the highpoint of the transition year experience and shall not be forgotten hastily.